

Using the Seal as the Nation Expands

The United States government applied the Great Seal to treaties, presidential proclamations and many other documents as its involvement in international affairs grew.

After the U.S. confirmed the Great Seal in June 1782, the Secretary of Congress applied the first seal to a document of the Continental Congress that empowered George Washington as “trustworthy and well-beloved” Commander in Chief to negotiate “better treatment for all Prisoners of War.”

AMERICAN TREATIES: 1782 – 1825

Between 1782 and 1789, the Continental Congress affixed Seals on nine treaties and other diplomatic papers. As the U.S. defined itself, foreign governments at times protested the placement or absence of the U.S. Seal on official documents.

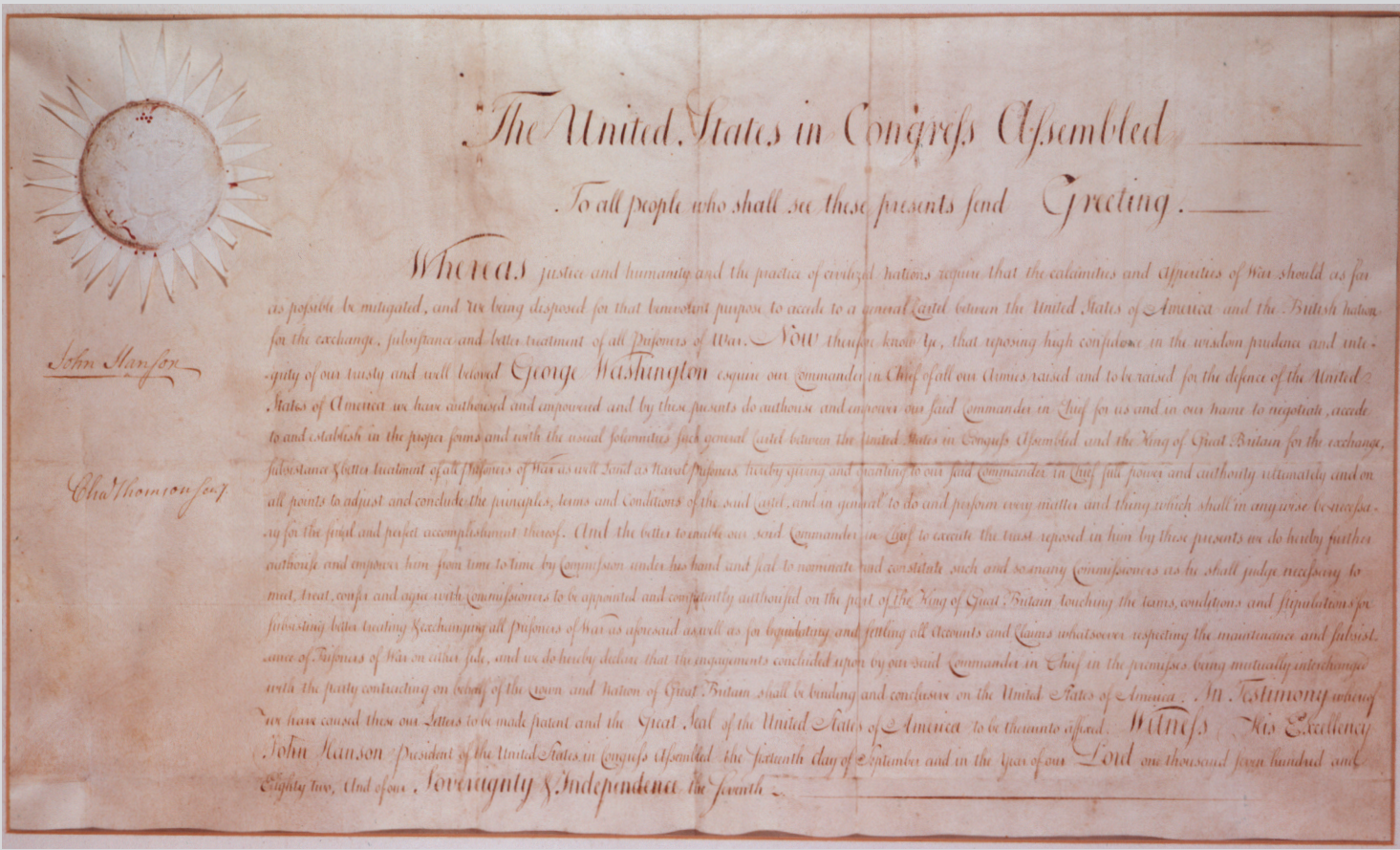
As the United States expanded, ratified treaties marked its growth. When the U.S. acquired the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, the new nation had not yet produced a pendant, or hanging seal in a round box, seen in the treaty photo.

The 1782 die was too small and plain for the lofty formality of treaty ratification. A comparison of the 1782 Seal to the large hanging Seals in silver boxes illustrates how the U.S. changed its self-perception among the nations of the world over its first four decades.

The Pendant Seal

Fragile wax often decomposes when sealed on a flat surface. By the 1100s attaching a hanging or pendant seal to cords affixed to the manuscript became standard practice. Silver, gold and wooden boxes called skippets protected the seals and made it possible to display designs on the front and back.

September 16, 1782, the United States government affixes its seal to a document for the first time.



Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, The George Washington Papers

Pictured here is the French copy of the 1803 Louisiana Treaty displaying a pendant seal.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC8298807)

The U.S. used a pendant, or hanging seal for the first time on the Treaty of Ghent in 1815, which ended the War of 1812 with Great Britain.



Scan from The Eagle and the Shield by Patterson and Douglass, page 172

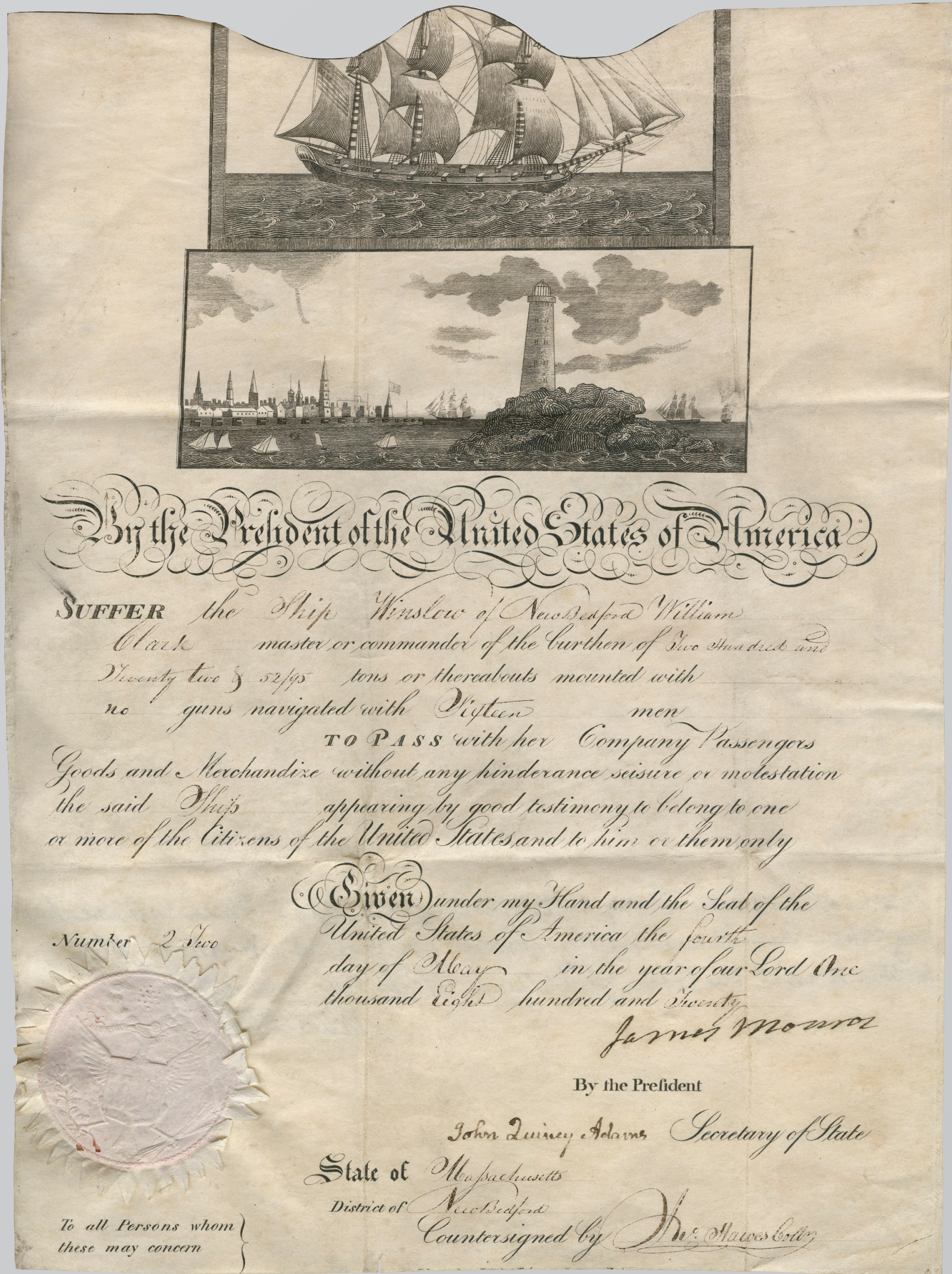
The Masi Seal brought a robust presence to U.S. treaty ratification.



Courtesy of the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State

THE SEAS MAKE WAY FOR SHIPS WITH U.S. PASSPORTS

The thousands of ships' passports sealed from 1795 to the mid 1800s attest to the vigor of the new republic's expanding economy. Also called the Mediterranean passport, this document offered protection from pirates as it proved that the U.S. had signed treaties with the North African Barbary Coast countries.



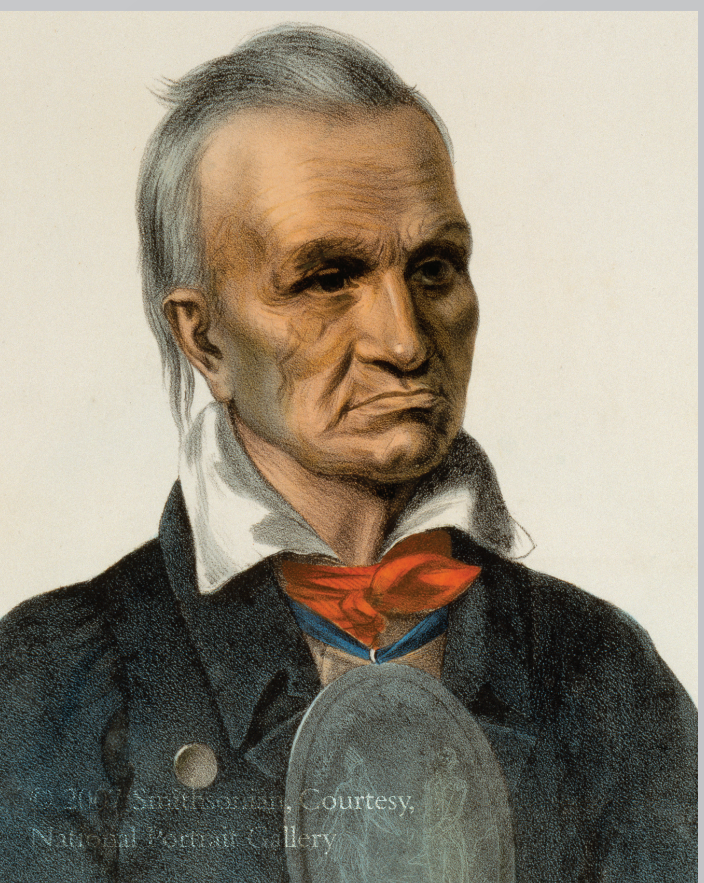
Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC895194)

EARLY U.S. PEACE MEDALS FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

Only from 1789 to 1795 did the United States government present Native Americans with peace medals that bore the Great Seal design. Later peace medals differed in appearance.



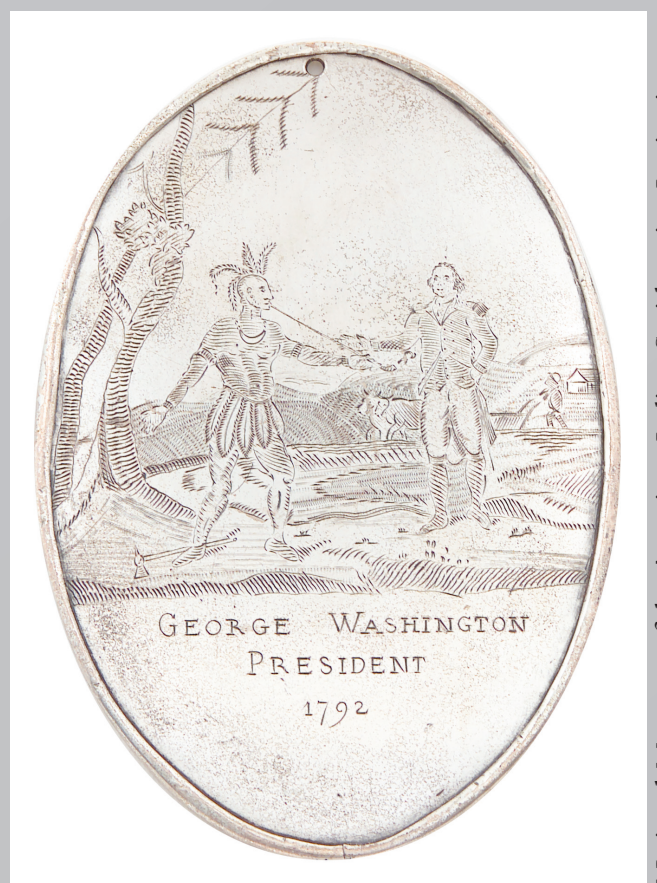
Washington Presenting Medal to Red Jacket
In the painting by Hal Sherman, President George Washington extends a medal to Red Jacket, who had led a delegation of 50 Indians to the Federal government in Philadelphia in 1782.



Seneca Chief, Red Jacket (1757-1830) wears a Peace Medal that indicates the respect George Washington had for him.



The Great Seal is engraved on the front of the Indian Peace Medal.



The back of the medal depicts President Washington and a native exchanging a peace pipe. They stand in front of a farm scene that symbolizes taking up a settled way of life.